

The Queen of Carleon

Book One:

Legends of Avalyne

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PROLOGUE

The war had raged for ten years.

Balfure had fallen but not easily. They had fought him for half that time and spent the rest of it learning that as long as the free races of Avalyne stood apart, they would never defeat him. No race was safe in their kingdom, not the men in their grand cities, not the elves in their enchanted forests and not even the dwarves in their vast catacombs beneath the earth.

Balfure, a lesser spirit and former servant of the Celestial Gods, had come to Avalyne with all the power and dark sorcery he could draw from the Shadow Realm. Establishing his own kingdom in the harsh, rocky wastelands of Abraxes, he had sent forth his Berserker warriors from his Iron Citadel and began the conquest of the known world.

It was the dwarves who suffered first when the Shadow Lord moved quickly to secure the realms belonging to the dwarven warlords of Iridia. Requiring the expertise of Avalyne's greatest weapon smiths to arm his forces, he attacked their strongholds beneath the earth. Sending in his servants, the goblin armies of the Cinder Mountains, who were more than accustomed to moving through underground cities with speed, Iridia was taken in a matter of days. Much of the dwarf population succeeded in fleeing, avoiding the enslavement that befell those who had not, and so they sought refuge in other kingdoms.

The elves, who normally had little to do with men, had watched the carnage indifferently. That is until Balfure was able to use his dark power to penetrate the enchanted veil that protected their forest kingdoms from invaders. Until the green of Eden Ardhen, the home of the Elf High Queen Lylea, was breached and despoiled, the elves had believed themselves to be safe from Balfure. However, when Lylea was forced to flee following her son's murder by Balfure's Berserkers, the elves were awakened to the reality of how vulnerable they truly were.

While the immortal elves were still reeling from their losses, Balfure made his final push to dominate the free lands of Avalyne. For ten years the kingdom of Carleon held fast against the relentless attacks upon their borders, until exhaustion and overwhelming grief had driven them into defeat. As the first city Sandrine burned, only the quick thinking of a royal nurse had saved the House of Icara from complete ruin.

For twenty-five years, war raged from one corner of Avalyne to another. With Carleon occupied by Balfure, neighbouring Angarad fought against invasion as the elves reinforced the enchantment that kept their realm safe, sometimes with success and sometimes with tragic consequences. Meanwhile, the dwarves had become refugees, driven to exile because of the loss of Iridia.

On the thirty-fifth anniversary of Balfure's first attack, a young man of Carleon was admitted to an audience in Eden Taryn—the new home of High Queen Lylea—by an elf of neighbouring Eden Halas. The young man, calling himself Dare, had come to make a proposal to the elf Queen, and he offered a suggestion that none of them had considered before.

Alliance.

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Although Dare presented himself to her as just an ordinary man, Lylea's Sight knew that he was in fact the exiled King of Carleon—Alasdare of House Icara.

During their flight from Sandrine, Dare's nurse Rachel had stumbled into Eden Halas, mortally wounded and carrying the babe she had saved at the cost of her own life. Fatefully, they were happened upon by Queen Syanne, wife of Halion, the ruler of that land. Already on her last breath, Rachel begged the Queen to take the child, revealing his parentage and beseeching her to keep him safe. A mother herself, Syanne could not bring herself to refuse the woman's final plea.

Returning the babe to her husband's court after poor Rachel had been welcomed by Father Death, she demanded he be given sanctuary. Halion had no interest in a human child, but could not refuse his wife. Acquiescing to her request, he allowed the infant to stay, content to let his wife do as she would as long as he was not inconvenienced. Her children already grown, Syanne was more than happy to care for a babe, even one that was from the race of men.

As a result, Dare grew up with an elvish education and the benefits of learning from an immortal people. Syanne gave him all the love that Halion would not while Aeron, their youngest son, grew to be best friends with the young boy. By the time Dare was eighteen years old, he had come to understand who he was and how he had come to be exiled in Eden Halas. As Syanne explained his heritage, the boy accepted his fate and knew that he would fight Balfure to free Carleon and avenge his family.

With the friends at his side that would come to be known as the Circle, he travelled across the realms, forging friendships and learning all he could about the different races of Avalyne. He journeyed to the mountains of the Jagged Teeth, where he had heard of an ancient wizard, the last of his order, had recently awakened from his sleep of thousands of years. Tamsyn, a seraf mage from the Order of Enphilim, was the last of his kind, the rest vanished during the Primordial Wars of millennia past. Enlisting Tamsyn's aid, for magic was something he could not fight without a wizard, Dare had reached his twenty-fourth year by the time he faced the High Queen.

Lylea had looked into his heart and saw that Dare could bring about a golden age of peace and prosperity, not just to Carleon but to all the races of Avalyne. After gaining her support, Dare spent the next five years building an army equal to any that Balfure could envision. He convinced the dwarves to join him. While revealing nothing of his heritage, he travelled through occupied Carleon and rallied his people to fight, inspiring in them the dream of freedom.

After five years of preparation and evading Balfure's attempts to kill him, Dare was finally able to face the enemy on the battlefield.

United by their belief in him, Dare earned the title of War Dragon and led the campaign against Balfure, driving the dark sorcerer back to his lands in Abraxes and then laying siege to his Iron Citadel. When that too was overcome, it was Dare with the help of Aeron, the dwarf Kyou, the warrior maid Celene and Tamsyn, who ended Balfure once and for all.

Or so they thought.

For evil was never just confined to one dark lord.

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CHAPTER ONE: UNEXPECTED EXPECTATION

When Calfax confirmed the news, Arianne could scarcely believe it.

She had worked herself into a state of vexation as she fought the desire to place more importance on the symptoms she felt. Then she began to accept without question that all were signs of some impending joy. She had moved through her daily life, feeling as if she were in a state of limbo, driving her poor husband to distraction because he could not fathom what was at the heart of her temperamental state. She longed to tell him all that was in her mind, but was held back by the thought of disappointing him.

That, and the possibility that he might become so terrified by the idea that he could take the first horse out of the kingdom and hide in Tamsyn's remote tower in the forgotten corners of the Jagged Teeth.

What was it with men of courage and strength, who could ride forth and slay a thousand Berserker warriors without a flinch but went into complete and utter ruin when confronted with the possibility of becoming a father? Arianne suspected that not even the Gods could answer that question, and as a result chose not to torment her King with the possibility that he might have an heir before she herself knew for certain.

Besides, Dare had many other matters to occupy his mind.

As the High King of the newly unified Carleon, the former War Dragon was working hard to rebuild the kingdom in the wake of the destruction wrought by Balfure's war. Any who thought that being King was about power and glory would be shocked to learn how arduous it was to be architect of a country's restoration. Too many times Arianne had stepped into the Great Hall to see him working tirelessly in consultation with his ministers.

When he paused to catch his breath, Arianne could see the glimmer in his eyes that longed for simpler days, when he was simply Dare—the exiled Prince of Carleon.

Yet he was a good man, this one she loved beyond reason or thought. He would carry the burden because his people needed him and because he was the last of his house, at least until now. He alone had left Eden Halas and stepped out into the world, with the courage and the will to see Balfure driven from Avalyne for all time. And Arianne would be at his side forever, carrying that burden with him, to fill his life with the simple pleasures such as the news she was now about to impart.

Today there was no longer any doubt in mind after Calfax, the royal physician, had confirmed that her suspicions had been true—she was with child. She drifted, if it was possible for a flesh and blood being to drift, through the halls of the palace, with her hands on her belly in secret delight. What a sight she must have been to the palace staff—the Queen of Carleon sweeping about the place wearing the smile of a happy fool.

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She knew they were probably grateful for her good mood since she had difficult been of late. Arianne resolved to make it up to those who had borne the brunt of her mood, especially Dare, who was a devoted and attentive husband. After all, being Queen did not excuse bad behaviour in any shape or form.

Her mother had taught her that.

Thinking of Queen Lylea made Arianne's smile widen, knowing how thrilled she would be at the news. Despite her sometimes aloof manner and her adherence to ensuring all forms were observed, Arianne knew her mother would like nothing better than to be a grandmother allowed to spoil her grandchildren shameless.

It was a grandmother's, right after all.

As always when he was with taking counsel with his counsellors and advisors, Dare was in the Great Hall when Arianne found him a short time after she had received her news. He spent a great deal of time in this room of late, attempting to portion out men and resources to the lands that were still being plagued by scattered remains of Balfure's army. The Berserkers, without their master, were even more dangerous than before, as their rampage was now without purpose or direction. They were mindless beast, driven by instinct and need, which made their behaviour difficult to predict and even harder to defend.

She watched him a moment, circling the large wooden table covered with maps, engaged in serious discussion with Aeron and Ronen (his most trusted advisers), while she stood there being so very proud of him.

Arianne remembered the day Dare first arrived at her mother's court in Eden Taryn.

He was but twenty-five, having spent much of his life in the court of Eden Halas. Arianne had heard the gossip of a human child being adopted by Queen Syanne, and how this action had caused much disquiet between her and her King. Naturally, she was curious as to what reason this human could have to seek an audience with her mother—the elven High Queen in all of Avalyne. He had been taken through the Veil protecting their city by Syanne's youngest child, Prince Aeron. Even so, Arianne was astonished that her mother allowed the incursion by a human into their lands, even if he was accompanied by an elf.

However, Lylea, who possessed the gift of the Sight, had claimed this audience was one of importance. It could change *everything*.

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Arianne could not imagine how so when she first saw him. He looked like a ruffian, with threadbare clothes that were dusty from too much travel and the leather of his boots were scuffed and worn. Sporting a day's growth on his face, his dark brown hair was unruly and hung about his shoulders like it had never seen a brush. However, she noticed, even as she sat at her mother's right hand to receive him, that he was beautiful, despite the pains he took to conceal it. She wondered if he simply did not care enough to exploit it or whether this was a guise he wore to disarm people into believing he was nothing more than a vagabond.

Overall, it was *not* a good first impression.

At least not until he spoke in that soft spoken voice of his and revealed words that were remarkably eloquent, possessing a tone of humility and awe at being in their presence. Even without the gift of her mother's Sight, Arianne was capable of recognising liars, and she knew every word he uttered was issued with sincerity and reverence. When he addressed them, he did not bandy about words of flattery and posture, he spoke from the heart and told them what he dreamed.

He dreamed to unite Carleon and drive Balfure from Avalyne forever.

He was the last son of House Icara and it was his duty to honour the kings that came before him by restoring Carleon to its people once more. Such dreams were nothing new from the race of men, Arianne had thought. They were always quick to anger and easily prodded into war, which was why the elves had little to do with them in the past and remained hidden behind the Veil. However, what he said next made everyone in the court sit up and pay attention.

Dare said defeating Balfure could not be done alone.

The folly of all the races had been the attempt to defeat them alone because prejudice and tradition prevented them from considering anything else. All the people of Avalyne needed to work together, not just men and elves but the dwarves too and any race that felt their liberty threatened by Balfure's hunger for conquest. To her mother, he had asked how much longer were they prepared to put all their faith in the Veil protecting them from Balfure. He had breached Eden Ardhen once. What was to stop him from breaching the protection of Eden Taryn if he set his mind to it? And if he chose to come, were they certain that they could stop him?

These were disturbing questions and Arianne knew her mother had considered them at length. When Balfure swept through Eden Ardhen he used dark magic to penetrate the Veil and destroy their home of thousands of years. Her older brother, Adric, died during that battle to defend it, and both she and her mother mourned him still. Dare's words had much effect upon Lylea's still grieving heart and she too saw the wisdom in his words.

If we do not stand united, we will fall divided.

Arianne remembered how those words had resonated with her, even after the audience had finished. Lylea had dismissed him until she made her decision, and Dare had respected the lady's need for deliberation, retreating to the woods where his and his circle were camped. However, as he departed Lylea's throne room, he paused long enough to cast a shy gaze at Arianne. When their eyes touched, he pulled away embarrassed, as if he was caught spying upon something he had no business in seeing.

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Intrigued, Arianne found him at the campsite later that day and when she spoke to him, he was barely able to meet her gaze. She found it utterly endearing that he, who had been so strong and determined before her mother, was now flustered and uncertain in her presence. However, when he *did* look at her, Arianne found herself staring into eyes so blue, it was like staring into a drop of sky distilled from the heavens. His gaze was penetrating and he spoke to her with the wonder of a man who could scarcely believe that he was in the company of such as her.

Arianne was a thousand years old, but no elf she had ever met in all that time had ever touched her heart the way he did when she finally got him to smile.

She hated to interrupt him when he was in counsel with Ronen, the Bân of Carleon, and Aeron, representing the elves, because Dare wanted the relationship forged by the Alliance against Balfure endure beyond the war. Alliances had to be maintained, Dare had told her, or else each race would fall back into its old practices of isolation and they would be in the same vulnerable place that Balfure had found them in.

Arianne did not have to hear what was being discussed to know that the subject of greatest concern at this time was the rampage of the Berserkers across Northern Province. Dare had told her the night before that he would have to dispatch soldiers to clear out the infested lands so that the business of farming and industry could resume once more. They need to feed and they need to build to forge a new future and that could not be done if towns were being besieged by the remains of Balfure's monstrous armies.

It was Aeron with his keen elven senses that first noticed her arrival. The others followed his gaze and stopped immediately what they were doing to face her. She stifled a laugh when she saw Dare's pained expression, as he wondered what sin he had committed to warrant an unexpected visit to call him out. Poor Dare, she thought, and knew that she had many amends to make to her husband, who could not conceive of her unhappiness if there were something he could do to change it.

'Your highness,' Ronen, the second highest authority in the kingdom, greeted her. She always found that he was such a contrast to Dare with his dark blond hair worn loose, as that was the fashion for men in Carleon who wished to appear well-groomed, unlike Dare's perpetually unruly locks.

'Ronen,' she answered with a slight bow of her head.

Ronen was given the title of Bân because he was the first captain of Sandrine to follow Dare when the exiled Prince returned to the city to rallying the forces needed to fight Balfure. By the time Dare had arrived, Ronen's spirit was near exhausted from having to uphold Balfure's occupation of his homeland. A soldier with a good heart, he was not much older than Dare and enforcing Balfure's law was driving him to breaking point.

The arrival of the King had renewed him and given him a sense hope while Ronen reminded Dare of a childhood friend and a trusted member of his circle who died before the war against Balfure had begun. Ronen's renewed sense of hope and Dare's memory built a bond between them that was more than the service of a lord to his King, it was one of real friendship.

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There was no need for such formality when she regarded Aeron. He was fair, like all her people were fair. Tall and lean, his brown almost black hair was worn loose, and always seemed wild and tousled even though it was braided in places to keep from being unruly. Only the tips of his elven ears were exposed through the dark strands. Aeron was handsome and always of interest to the opposite sex, though he had yet to bonded to anyone. Even though he had walked Avalyne for a thousand years, to men he had the appearance of a thirty year old.

‘My *Queen*,’ he said, his dark blue eyes dancing with mischief while a small smile crossed his lips.

Arianne rolled her eyes at the formal greeting, wondering how it was that Aeron, with whom she had spent many summers as a child during Lylea’s visits to Eden Halas, could still be as vexing as when were children. No matter how many times she reminded him that since she gave him his first kiss when they were both eight, had witnessed his first fall out of a tree, and that they had known each other for most of their lives, he need not call her by title when they were among friends, he continued to ignore her. Arianne was convinced he was doing it to be annoying like he was when they were children.

Dolt.

‘Arianne, is something wrong?’ Dare asked his wife gingerly, as she was easier to provoke these days than an ogre with a bad tooth.

‘Nothing my love,’ Arianne assured him, and disarmed his anxiety with a smile he’d know was meant just for him. ‘I would just like a moment alone with my King, if my lords do not mind?’ She glanced at the two men.

‘Of course,’ Ronen answered without hesitation, and he glanced at Dare for the King’s leave to depart.

‘I will send for you when we are done,’ Dare replied, thinking absurdly that she wanted privacy so there would be no witnesses when she slaughtered him.

Both men and elf obeyed and left the room.

‘If this is about where I left my boots again, I swear that affairs of state occupied my mind and I forgot...’ Dare started to apologise before Arianne closed the distance between them and silenced him with a kiss.

Caught by surprise, he stared at her with puzzlement for a moment before the pleasure of it made him slide his arms around her waist and kiss her back with equal affection. She was the love of his life and being King would not mean as much if she were not at his side. Her love had given him the strength to take back his kingdom, save his people and be the man he was today. If he became a great king, it was because she had made him so.

‘I am confused,’ he finally admitted when they parted.

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‘Of course you are,’ she said smiling, ‘I come here on an entirely new matter. However, now that you have made mention of it, is it so hard to put them away?’

‘You are teasing me,’ he retorted, a brow cocked over one eye in playful accusation.

‘Yes, I am,’ she confessed, smirking.

Dare pulled her to him and kissed her again, glad to see that she was in a better mood than she had been during the past few days. In truth, his desire for self-preservation was superseded by his love for her, and so he worried what could have bothered her so greatly that she was lashing out so uncharacteristically. Arianne’s nature was playful and spirited but she was never biting in her manner. Her behaviour of late had been a new experience for him.

Yet it took only a kiss for him to fall in love with her all over again.

Her effect on him was always the same. Since the very first moment he laid eyes upon her at Lylea’s court, Dare was lost. She was a vision of loveliness that almost made him forget everything he came to say during that first audience with Lylea. Unlike her mother, who was known for her gold hair, Arianne took after her father, possessing his dark brown hair that shimmered when she wore it long. It framed her oval face with its high cheek bones, full lips and eyes as blue as Dare imagined the deepest corner of the ocean would be. Her skin, like all elven ladies, was pale, but to his eyes it was almost luminescent. She did not seem quite real, like something that had wandered out of a dream. Watching her that first time, his heart pounded in his chest like he was a boy.

To this day, Dare never understood why she loved him enough to give up immortality.

‘And what can the King do for his Queen today?’ he asked, considerably more at ease.

‘I came to apologize for how I have been these past few weeks,’ Arianne admitted first and foremost. ‘I know I have been difficult.’

That was an understatement, but he wisely chose to remain silent.

‘What troubled you, my love?’ he asked, grateful that at last she was talking to him about this. They always shared everything and not knowing the reason for her foul mood had provoked his worst fears about their relationship. ‘I was starting to fear that you might have regretted the choice to give up your immortality for me.’

Arianne stared at him with disbelief at the mere suggestion.

‘Fool,’ she snapped, and slapped him on the arm for still harbouring such foolish insecurities. Did he still not grasp even now that he was her life? ‘You men can be so frightfully wrong at times,’ Arianne chided.

‘I warn you lady, striking the King is a mortal offense,’ he returned playfully.

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‘I will take my chances,’ she snorted dismissively. ‘I will tell you this once more, but if I have to do it again, I will call upon all the powers at my disposal to show you my displeasure. I love you and I always will. Were I was immortal or not, you are my soul mate. If one lifetime with you is all there is, I will never regret it. You hold my heart, my King. Be secure in that fact, if no other.’

Properly admonished, Dare nodded in silence and knew that it was foolishness that allowed his mind to travel such dark roads. She had proven her love for him on more occasions than he could count and he had faith in her. Still, he could not help but wonder what in the name of Celestial Gods she saw in him to abandon her immortal existence to share a very mortal one with him.

‘All right,’ he conceded defeat, ‘but you must admit you were rather frightening these past weeks and fear is not something I succumb to easily. I’ve fought *monsters*.’

‘I have my reasons,’ she said dryly, disappointed that the surprise she had intended to give him had been waylaid by an old argument. Then again, what in life ever took place according to plan? ‘Something had been preying upon my mind that I could not speak of to you until I had confirmation of it. I am afraid waiting for an answer frayed at my nerves more than my disposition could endure.’

‘What, Rian?’ he demanded, a little alarmed that she had not told him that she was so vexed about something. Theirs was a relationship that turned on their ability to confide everything to each other. It worried him what she might think too much for him to bear. ‘Did something happen? Are you alright?’

‘I am fine,’ she stilled him again her finger. ‘Dare, we are going to have a baby.’

The expression of stunned silence that crossed his face was so acute that there was an instant she thought this news was not to his liking. All men wanted sons, did they not? She wanted to give him an heir, to consolidate his claim to the throne and show him that he was not the last son of his house. However, his astonishment was but brief and her fears were dispelled when a great light flickered into being behind his eyes, and soon it encompassed his face with a brilliant and happy grin.

‘A baby!’ he exclaimed, with the eagerness of a boy given a wondrous gift. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded, relieved to be able to tell him finally and now being able to share the joy of it by his reaction to her news. ‘I had begun to suspect weeks ago that I might be quickened, but I could not be certain until today. That is why I was seemed so out of sorts. I am sorry that I upset you but I so wanted to be certain before I told you.’

‘And you are now?’ he asked, staring at her in wonder before his gaze dropped to her stomach where his child, no *their* child, was growing within.

‘Yes. Calfax confirmed it for me today. We are going to have a baby in the spring.’

‘Oh, Rian!’ he exclaimed, and he lifted her up by the waist and twirled her around in an uncharacteristic show of exhilaration. ‘I love you and I will love our son.’

‘Your son?’ She gazed down at him with an imperious stare. ‘Are you so sure it’s going to be a boy? It could be a girl.’

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‘I don't care what it is,’ he admitted immediately. ‘I do not care if we have a boy or a girl. I will love it either way. You have already made me happier than I ever thought possible but now, knowing that we have created this together—there are no words to describe it.’

‘Oh, Dare,’ she spoke, her voice choking with the emotion that corresponded with the tears glistening in her eyes at the delight she saw in his face. Resting her head against his chest, she took comfort in the sound of his heart beating so close to her ear and wondered if her baby was listening to hers in the same fashion. ‘We are going to have a baby! Keeping this to myself has been so hard, I've wanted to shout it out from the roof tops ever since I first thought I might be with child. I am so glad I no longer have to keep this from you!’

‘I wish you had told me,’ he said, brushing the top of her dark hair with a light kiss. ‘You should not have to keep such a thing to yourself. It's no wonder you were so disagreeable.’

‘I did not want to plant false hopes, my love. You have so much to worry your mind already, I did not wish to see you disappointed if I was wrong.’

‘Nothing that you do could ever disappoint me my love.’ Dare stared into her face and wanted her to see that it was the truth. Still, he could not deny that he was delighted that they were going to have a child and he truly meant it when he said that he cared not if it were a boy or a girl. ‘However, now that we know for sure, I feel as you do. I want everyone to know!’

‘Everyone?’ She gave him a look wondering what devilry was he conjuring in his mind.

‘Yes,’ he grinned. ‘I think it is time that the King and Queen of Carleon hold court with their friends again. How about we have a little party and we can make the announcement to the whole city?’

Arianne thought of her Lylea, Queen Syanne, the wizard Tamsyn, Kyou the dwarf, Celene, Tully and Keira of the Green, who had all given Dare refuge when Balfure's most evil servants—the Disciples—had been hunting him. The last time they had all been gathered, it was during Dare's coronation and wedding. She would dearly love to see them again, and knew that Dare would also be pleased to spend time with the people who knew him before he became King.

‘I think that would be most acceptable, my Lord.’ She showed her agreement with another kiss.

‘Well then run along and arrange it,’ he smirked, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

‘This was your idea!’ she exclaimed with mock outrage. ‘How is it the duty falls to me?’

‘Well, celebrations are strictly your responsibility, my Queen. I only deal with the running of the kingdom, fighting the wars and killing of the occasional insect in our chambers. If you wished the arrangement changed, I have no objection.’ He winked at her.

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‘Really?’ Arianne snorted and pulled away from him. In truth, her duties amounted to a little more than that. As his Queen, it was her responsibility to ensure well being of their people by seeing to the creation of schools, houses of healing and other public works. Nevertheless, her mind whirling already with all the things had to be done for such a celebration to take place. ‘I will do your bidding this once, my King,’ she teased. ‘But only because it suits me.’

‘Well *thank you*, my Queen,’ he returned, smiling as he watched her sauntering towards away. Knowing that he was soon to be a father by a woman he never thought could love him back made the day's duty a little less tedious. Arianne was able to lift his spirit like no one else alive, and he still marvelled at the discovery that someone so beautiful could also be as equally kind.

‘Rian,’ he called out before she left the hall.

‘Yes, Dare?’ She cast those magnificent blue eyes back at him with a quizzical expression.

‘I love you,’ he said softly.

‘As you should, my love,’ she replied as she left.

CHAPTER TWO: INVITATION

Visitors to the Green were rare.

Nestled in the western shadow of the great Baffin Range, the village was hidden away in the middle of Barrenjuck Green, the oldest forest in Avalyne. It was also the only community of size before one reached the distant fishing town of Lenkworth. Shielded by the mountains and flanked by the Brittle Sea, the people of the village were of human stock but had managed to remain untouched by Balfure and his armies. Consisting of farmers, the folk of the Green found no reason to venture beyond their borders, particularly when they heard the tale of travellers who spoke of all the trouble that was happening in the rest of Avalyne.

Even after the outside world had invaded their lands seven years ago and tortured one of its own, the villagers continued as they always had, indifferent to the world-changing events taking place beyond the Green. They were after all, a village of produce and livestock farmers, who maintained their prosperity by selling their goods to other lands and retreating back to their own, seeing little reason to be neighbourly when such thing only invited trouble.

During the war, they had remained largely unscathed. Their geographical location made invasion by Balfure's forces difficult. Aside from having to cross the formidable mountains, known to have the highest peaks in all of Avalyne, an invader would then have to enter the Green to reach the village. The forest was old and dense, with a reputation for being haunted (though that would have done little to deter Balfure). However, the locals believed that the spirits of those killed during the Primordial Wars had found their resting place in the ancient trees, and that was enough to discourage visitors.

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Respecting the village's desire for isolation, the High King after his ascension, established the Watch Guard who would watch over the lands of the Green, ensuring that no unwanted incursions would be made into its territory. It was in keeping with a promise he had made to one of its people, whose courage and charity had led to a devastating personal cost after his life had been saved.

Seven years ago Dare, Aeron and his friend Braedan were pursued into the Green by Balfure's evil Disciples. Forced into unfamiliar woods after Braedan and Aeron led the enemy away, he came upon Furnsby Farm, owned by Tully and Keira, a newlywed couple who spent their days growing vegetables and rearing cows. Tully, who was often considered too inquisitive for his own good, gave Dare refuge, despite his wife's reservations about becoming involved in non-Green affairs. Tully agreed to take Dare out of the wood, as he was more than familiar with the dense forest that had caused many a traveller to become lost to fatal consequences.

The effort to lead the Disciples away from Dare resulted in Braedan's death and Aeron barely escaping alive. Unfortunately, in resuming their search for the exiled King, the Disciples were able to track the future King to the Furnsby farm and found Keira there instead. Stubbornly refusing to surrender the King's whereabouts, she was subjected to the Disciples' dreaded torture of the Blinding Curse.

When the blood of the desert burrowers, a small worm-like creature native to Abraxes, was administered to a hapless victim, it had the terrible effect of burning out the victim's eyes and brains beneath the flesh. It was forced upon a victim in small doses until the extreme pain or fear of blindness produced the desired results. Keira's courage proved more than a match for the Disciples, but her refusal to yield had agonising consequences.

It was hours before Tully would return, but when he did, it was to the discovery that Keira was almost dead and her sight near lost. Dare had raced back to the farm as soon as he learned that the Disciples had entered the Green and found the couple in their desperate situation. A situation he was painfully aware he had brought upon them. Arianne, who was to meet him at the edge of the Green, ferried Keira back Eden Taryn as quickly as she could. Only the healing skills of the elves could save Keira's eyesight, but she would bear the scars of her torture from that day onward.

Despite this, however, the couple bore no enmity toward the King who had brought the Disciples into their lives. In gratitude, Dare promised that no invader would ever set foot in the Green when he became King. It was a promise he held sacred and upon ascending his throne, fulfilled by the establishment of the Watch Guard whose duty it was to watch over the Green and its gentle folk.

Everyone noticed the rider from Carleon.

Garnering curious stares from the locals as he rode through the small community to deliver his message, the messenger knew his instructions. Deliver the news, wait for a message if there was one to be received and then leave *immediately*. He was to disturb nothing in this small community beyond the duty he needed to perform. Once he had left the Green, the town of Tumbur which sat at the foothills of the Baffin Range would be the only place he could stop for rest before crossing the mountain and returning to Carleon.

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Although the presence of the visitor drew much interest, the locals knew for whom the messenger had come. There was not one person in the village who did not know the High King's connection to the occupants of Furnsby Farm. The couple had been deemed foolish by most of the village for becoming involved in the whole business with the Disciples in the first place, but there was no denying the courage displayed by Keira Furnsby or the admiration she so rightly deserved for saving the King.

The messenger gave his news to Keira when he was met at the door to their home. Keira gave her response immediately, aware that it was a long ride to Tumbur and he would have to make it again if she made him wait for an answer. It had been more than a year since she and Tully had last travelled, and she knew Tully would very much like to accept the King's invitation. Despite the fact that Tully enjoyed his life in the Green, Keira knew he liked to travel and would be thrilled to see what had become of the world since Dare had become King.

Sending the messenger on his way after telling him that the Furnsbys would be in attendance at the King's celebration, she left the house in search of her husband. Putting on her boots and her cloak because the air was cool this morning, she made her way to the east paddock where she knew Tully was working. Today, the spring calves were finally old enough to leave their pens and she knew that Tully would like to keep an eye on them as they took their first tentative steps into the world.

'Tully!' she called out to him as she neared the paddock, her red hair escaping the hood of her cloak and blowing over her face.

Tully Furnsby had been watching carefully the calves sniffing at each other in interest, trying to make sense of the world outside their confinement, when he heard his wife's call. Leaning against the fence, he glanced over his shoulder to see her approach, wondering what she was doing here. She was a small woman, petite in her stature, with freckles across her nose and brown eyes. Life on a farm had made her strong, although not even to withstand torture by the Disciples, he thought sourly.

'Is everything alright, Keira?' he asked as soon as she was near enough. 'You're not feeling poorly, are you?' He launched into the familiar tirade of questions that was sure to annoy her, he realised belatedly.

'Tully,' Keira's expression darkened, wishing he would not treat her as if she were made of glass. 'I'm fine. I would tell you if I wasn't.'

'No you wouldn't,' Tully countered, perfectly aware that she'd keep silent him because she didn't want to worry him. He knew he should not be so over protective. Ever since the Disciples, Tully blamed himself for what happened to her though he would never admit it out loud. Whenever she had a bout of sickness or woke up screaming in the night from a nightmare, he cursed himself again for letting this happen to her. He wished he could show her how much he admired her for withstanding the torture and how strong she was but all that ever came out was his worry.

'We are pair. aren't we,' he smiled at her.

'We are,' Keira agreed, leaning over the fence to kiss him on the cheek.

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‘So what’s happened? Did you need me for something?’ he asked, guessing that whatever the reason for her presence here, it wasn’t urgent.

‘I do,’ Keira nodded, reaching into the folds of her cloak to produce the invitation delivered to by the man of Carleon.

The envelope was very fine and did not appear to be stationery common to the village. Farmers were very sensible with their parchment, preferring function over elaboration, and they certainly wouldn’t use one that gilt with gold. If they even used it at all. In the Green, the fastest way to pass news was to go to the market and tell Mrs Birdweather about it. After that, *everyone* in village would know.

‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘This,’ Keira said smiling, ‘is an invitation from Dare to visit him and the Queen in Sandrine. It appears that he is having a party and wants us to attend.’

As always, Tully’s first thought when considering such a trip was how Keira would manage it, because Sandrine was such a long way, away. Despite the fact that it was seven years in the past, Keira had not recovered as she ought and occasionally she had strange turns, but he also knew that a change of scenery might also help the situation.

‘I told the messenger we would go,’ Keira declared in case his hesitation was due to his usual concerns about her.

‘You did?’ he asked with some surprise, and he felt himself relax in light of that revelation. If she felt well enough to go then he wouldn’t argue with her. She’d only get cross with him if he did. Keira didn’t like being reminded that she wasn’t as well as she should be. ‘Then we’ll go.’ He grinned. ‘It would be nice to see Dare and that lot again.’

It still felt odd though, calling the King of Carleon by name or to think of him as the War Dragon. To Tully, he would always be Dare, who had appeared on their doorstep needing help, and who showed them that there was no such thing as hiding from evil if evil was determined to seek them out.

‘Yes, it would,’ Keira agreed, grateful that he had offered no protest.

‘I wonder what the celebration is about,’ he mused, not expecting an answer.

Keira knew, but she kept it to herself for now.

‘I suppose we’ll find out when we get to Sandrine. The why doesn’t matter much as long as we get to see our friends.’

‘You’re right as always, Tully,’ Keira agreed, and was glad to be going on a trip to see their old friends again.

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Unlike the messenger, who was required to cross the Baffin Range to deliver the invitation to the Furnsbys, the invitation sent to Kyou, the Weapons Master of Carleon, did not have as far to travel. At that very moment, the dwarf of Iridia was in the city, helping to reinforce the city's fortifications after years of neglect and damage from Balfure's attacks.

During the war with Balfure, Kyou had been like most of his people, forced to maintain a nomadic existence in the distant mountains of the Jagged Teeth or fall under the yoke of the Shadow Lord. Balfure had swept through their ancestral home of Iridia in the Starfall Mountains with his Berserker army and enslaved the Warlords of Iridia, the very greatest of the dwarf craftsmen. Intending for them to build him weapons of terrible cunning and ingenuity, Balfure's plan was to subjugate the dwarves and use their continued survival to bend the warlords to his will.

His father Atrato had been the greatest of the Warlords, but he refused to aid Balfure in his thirst for conquest. Balfure did not let him live long enough to regret his decision and his death served as an example to the others, who yielded reluctantly.

Kyou and the rest of Clan Atrato had fled Iridia and took to wandering until they arrived at the mountains of the Jagged Teeth. Reputedly the home of ancient Order of Enphili, Kyou had expected to find it abandoned, since no one had seen or heard of any of the mage from the Order in many hundreds of years. It did not take them long to discover how wrong they were. Living in isolation within his tower was the wizard Tamsyn, the last of the Order.

Tamsyn, who had been in deep sleep since the Primordial Wars, awakened to a world that was bedevilled by a new threat, and so offered the dwarves sanctuary in the Jagged Mountains, using his not so inconsiderable powers to shield them from Balfure's sorcery. In the meantime, he told Kyou, who was a young, vengeful youth, to have patience, that vengeance against Balfure would come in due course. He just had to wait. A change was coming.

That change came in the form of a bedraggled looking human who just happened to be the exiled heir to the throne of Carleon.

Dare had sought out House Atrato in the Jagged Mountains because to unite the scattered dwarf clans of Iridia, he needed the voice of Atrato's son to speak for him. A grand alliance was being forged—the greatest that Avalyne would ever see—and it was an army that would need weapons. It was a chance to avenge both their fathers and reclaim their kingdoms. Kyou joined Dare, because more than he wanted revenge, he wanted what his father had died for—the freedom of his people. Thus when Dare left the Jagged Mountains, Kyou left with him while the rest of his people set to work giving the future King exactly what he wanted.

The greatest weapons ever forged.

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